Enlarging Conceptions of Testing Moments and Critical Theory

Economies of Worth, *On Critique* and *Sociology of Engagements*

Laurent Thévenot

Discussing Luc Boltanski's research is a particularly delicate task for the person who co-authored works and articles with him that have given rise to a new sociological paradigm and led to the creation of the Groupe de Sociologie Politique et Morale. I could have avoided the difficulty by choosing a masterwork of his that is quite different from the works we wrote together, such as the admirable *Condition fœtale* (Boltanski, 2004). Yet, I have chosen instead to confront it in the spirit of the long, friendly, and on-going conversation between us, renewed this past year. I would like to bring to light differences which, though invisible in works that fully integrate our perspectives on a single object of study, may yet be discerned in our respective earlier and later writings. I have chosen to take up the question of enlarging critique, in connection with our respective explorations of critical tests and what they contribute to critical theory.

In the first section, I evoke the before and after of the 'critical reality test' concept that Luc and I modelled in *Economies of Worth* (hereafter *EW*; original title *Economies de la grandeur*) (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1987) and in *On Justification* (*OJ*) (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006 [1991]). Here, 'before' and 'after' are to be understood in two ways: what happens before and after the critical test, and what can be contributed by analytical categories related to the test model and developed by each of us in works either preceding or following our collaboration. The second part approaches the language that is appropriate for expressing what is experienced in such trying moments. This leads to an encounter with literary works that brings us back to Boltanski, in this case to his theatrical work.

1. Before and After the 'Critical Reality Test'

After analysing in detail the various ties between sociology and criticism, Boltanski, in *On Critique* (*OC*), enlarges the model of critical test that we put forward in *EW*, distinguishing

three types of test (Boltanski, 2011 [2009]). This triad gives a clear picture of the major axes structuring the book; namely, the difference between the 'metapragmatic register' and 'practical moments', the 'reality'/'world' pair, 'hermeneutic contradiction', and even the grounds for emancipation. Here, I focus on Boltanski's way of enlarging critique, which I discuss in connection with my own way, put forward after *EW* in 'L'action qui convient' ['The Appropriate Action'] (Thévenot, 1990), in which the fundamental move is to identify and differentiate pragmatic regimes.

Dissociating/Associating Blind Trust in the Letter and the Unsettling Moment When Doubt Arises

In *OJ*, the 'model test' or the 'peak moment' [*grand moment*] (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006 [1991]: Chapter 5, 143) is added to a long discussion of the 'reality test' moment (ibid.: Chapter 1). The former terms designate 'a situation that holds together and is prepared for a test' that entails 'a pure and particularly consistent arrangement of beings from a single world' (ibid.: 143-144)**.** Our move to verbalize 'common worlds' (ibid.: Chapter 4, 125-211) gives the reader an 'impression of self-evidence and redundancy closely resembling the impression one gets during peak moments of adherence to a natural situation' (ibid.: Chapter 5, 158). As we were writing this together, Luc and I exchanged thoughts on the ambiguity of this 'peak moment', a moment that is not really a 'test' because the situation is arranged in such a way as to preclude criticism. It is my contention that both divergences and convergences between the sociological theories we developed separately after *EW* result from our respective responses to this ambiguity and that, furthermore, these two responses have generated distinct contributions to critical theory.

In *Les cadres*, Boltanski produced an original and highly fertile analysis of the 'making of a class' (Boltanski, 1987 [1982]). He threw light on the 'social technologies' that enable the 'collective persona' of social groups to be represented and, in consequence, identified. In *On Critique*, he used the two moments we had identified to deepen his analysis of institutional representation, taking up the 'peak moment' idea in order to achieve two things: *first*, to develop a model of institutions in which they are understood to rely on 'the work of confirmation, whose main operator […] is tautology' ('<what you call> a seminar is <indeed, in fact> a seminar') and which requires 'forms of codification', 'symbolic systems', and 'ceremonials' (Boltanski, 2011 [2009]: 72, 104); and, *second*, to reveal the domination exercised by such forms when they are understood as true 'reality'. His strategy was to regard the great moment as a test because human or non-human beings that are not attuned to the

way a given codified ceremony is arranged threaten to disrupt it. He designated this moment the 'truth test', in contradistinction to the 'reality test', which designates moments deliberately open to critique.

I previously had adopted a different strategy, though likewise grounded in the two 'moments' of endorsement and critique. In so doing, I was working in the wake of an earlier article of mine on the tension between codified forms and the particulars that those equivalence forms equate with one another. At the time, I was already exploring the coding paradox around the characterization of 'young' persons – evoking the same paradox for the characterization of 'worthy' ['*grand*'] persons in the sense of important or illustrious ones (Thévenot, 1979: 14-15). I highlighted the paradoxical tension between affirming the unifying, instituting letter of the code and the doubt awakened when differences and other possible connections are noted between the particular beings that get grouped together by the code form.[1] I considered mainly, at that time, the strategic utilization of this tension by competing social groups, in contrast to the purely logical understanding of it. This view on rival strategies around group boundaries was consistent with the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu. In my later model of 'investment in form' (Thévenot, 1984), however, which led to the break with my master in sociology, I handled the aforementioned tension in a new way. In this work, I conceived of 'investment in form', to cover a wide range of costly form-giving acts which offer guarantees and alleviate uncertain relationships. The sacrifice this requires is that of other possible forms of relationships and coordination, once persons 'commit themselves' and engage with each other and with objects according to a certain format (ibid.: 12). Institutions and law ensure such guarantees: *forma dat esse rei*. Yet, investment of form extends below strongly institutional or 'state forms' to encompass more localized and personalized conventions, qualifications, standards, scientific formulas, instructions, plans, methods, customs, shared habits, etc. (ibid.: 8, 25-32).

This model, developed before *Economies de la grandeur*, opened up the analysis to more and less strongly constituted forms, differentiating them in terms of the form's temporal and spatial validity and the solidity of the material equipment involved. Nonetheless, it concentrated on the moment actors endorse invested forms. A new phase began with 'The Appropriate Action' ['*L'action qui convient*'] paper (Thévenot, 1990), which preceded the second edition of *EW* (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991, 2006) and left its mark on our new 'Afterword'. In that article, I focused on the issue of uncertain 'coordination' of actions, showing that this approach helps to integrate the two moments in question. Making a 'judgment that temporarily assuages worry' assumes that actors endorse invested forms in a moment of trust in conventional markers. By contrast, they challenge this fixed judgment in

'the test moment, the moment of anxious confrontation between their conventional identification of an action and the unfolding of that action' (Thévenot, 1990: 41). A first move introduced by this paper consisted in integrating the two moments as two sides of one and the same 'mode of engagement of persons and things' or 'engagement in appropriate action' (ibid.: 43, 49, 51, 60). The dynamics of each regime unfolds the two sides of the guarantees – assurance, confidence, trust – that is, closing one's eyes or relying with blind faith on the marker of the guarantee, or opening one's eyes to remark what is sacrificed by relying on marked reality.

A second move came from the idea that coordination could be conceptually enlarged to include not only coordinating the action of several persons but also coordinating with oneself. Identifying basic commitments which are sources of valued assurance for oneself and others, I chose the terms 'engage' and 'engagement' to emphasize that such assurance is highly dependent on the arrangement of the material environment with which one engages while grasping it by means of a certain format, be it publicly and conventionally qualified, functional, familiar, or explorative. When prepared in a relevant format, the environment offers a pledge (*gage*) that guarantees the human being's valued capacity. Enlargement of this sort enables us to take up the question of personal identity and its mobile, fragile consistency, together with the question of its recognition (Thévenot, 2007b, 2011a) and the grounds for trusting others, within the limitation of doubt (Thévenot, 2013a). The fact that Boltanski set out in a different direction in no way undermines an important point of convergence between us. With regard to the coordination dynamic of 'justifiable action' and the 'collective conventions' of such action – pertaining to 'institutions', 'rules', 'norms', and 'roles' (Thévenot, 1990: 57) – the way I formulated the two moments is similar to Boltanski's distinction between a 'truth test' and a 'reality test'. For 'appropriate action' implies an 'analytical framework that simultaneously accounts for the following:

- moments at which coordination expresses a pre-established order, where the behaviour of the various persons remains consistent with, mutually adjusts to, and converges in accordance with a given order of things, moments that tend to reinforce ideas of objective constraint, social norm, equilibrium, successful communication, satisfactory performance of the language act, etc.;

- moments at which disquiet invades the scene, triggering disputes about what is at issue, moments of uncertainty and more or less critical doubt' (Thévenot, 1990: 57-58).

Boltanski's 'Metapragmatic Registers' (Confirmation *versus* Critique) as Opposed to 'Practical Moments' of Tacit Agreement / My Architecture of 'Engagement Regimes' Ranging from 'Public Concerns' to 'Personal Concerns' and Integrating Moments of 'Closed Eyes' and 'Open Eyes'

In *OC*, Boltanski links the two previously examined moments to two opposed tests, both of which occur within what he calls the 'metapragmatic register'. The 'truth test' moment is based on 'systems of confirmation' that sustain 'official assumptions'. For 'what is at stake in them is excluding uncertainty by confirming that what is *Is* in the sense of *really Is* – as it were, "in the absolute"' (Boltanski, 2011: 61). The 'reality test' moment, on the other hand, triggers a critique that 'creates unease [*inquiétude*] by challenging the reality of what presents itself as being, either in official expressions or in manifestations of common sense' (ibid.: 62). Boltanski conceives of the tension between the two as a 'hermeneutic contradiction', that is, 'the tangible manifestation of a difficulty rooted in the relationship between language and the situations of enunciation wherein it is realized' (ibid.: 87). At this point, he rightly refers to the tension between 'the letter' and 'the spirit' of the law.

My conceptualization of *regimes of engagement* offers a broader understanding of this tension in that it discovers it at the heart of all attempts to find guarantees or assurances, thereby moving beyond institutions and the field of language and language interpretation (Thévenot, 2006, 2007b, 2011b; in English 2002, 2007a, 2009, 2011a, 2013a, 2013b). A third move initiated by 'The Appropriate Action' was to identify regimes of engagement which differ with respect to their ability to communicate and make common a guarantee, although each of them is commonly understood as a source of assurance or trust. Instead of limiting analysis of the tension between 'confirmation' and 'critique' – or, more broadly speaking, 'doubt' – to the most publicly institutionalized format I discovered that a similar tension is to be found in all regimes of engagement because it is inherent in engagement per se. Apart from the letter of the conventional language used for institutional confirmation, apart from a conventional public landmark on which one can rely to gain assurance, in the *regime of engagement justified* by the common good, I was attentive to formats of markers and marks [*repères*] on which one relies in less public regimes that involve relations with the material environment in a quest for assurance. In each regime, one can rely blindly ('with one's eyes closed') on *marks* that one views as the most significant reference points for coordination. Yet, symmetrically to *marking*, engaging also involves the phase of doubting ('having one's eyes opened')**,** that is, *remarking* and, thus, noticing with renewed attention what one sacrifices, or fails to see, by 'blindly' trusting in the given mark.

The *regime of individual engagement in a plan* departs from models of action driven by individual will and models of rational instrumental action; it and involves a kind of assurance which plays a pivotal role in social life in our dealing with others or ourselves. This regime pertains to the capacity to project oneself into the future with the help of a functionally equipped environment. In this context, one relies on markers that indicate functionality. Marking of this sort involves a different format from qualification language, signalling the performance of a function. It is, however, readily associated with object-naming and action verbs. In the phase of doubt, one *remarks* what one sacrifices by focusing on functionalities and outputs and on the on-going revisions needed to carry out the plan.

In the *regime of familiar engagement*, a person's accommodation to surroundings arranged and indexed by her continual use engenders a specific kind of self-assurance: feeling at ease. This most personalized relation of caring for one's surroundings is a principal source of assurance in human life, but it is not easily made common. Here, marks are locally distributed and idiosyncratic indices. When one relies blindly on them, familiarization rigidifies into routine. When, on the contrary, one opens one's eyes, one distances oneself from such routinely fixed markers to remark and attend to what they cause one to sacrifice. In this, there is no recourse to language, interpretation, or reflexivity in the sense commonly given to that word. There is no critique or criticism either. And yet, there is a self-distancing from the mark. Ceasing to rely on one's own established marks and routine, one starts to feel one's way along by trial and error, precisely because one has questioned or disregarded one's familiar marks.

Boltanski's *OC* model proceeds differently, hardening the opposition between 'metapragmatic' and 'pragmatic' by way of language. In contrast to his 'metapragmatic register', structured into two tests that imply two types of 'reflexive moments', his 'pragmatic register' is made up of a single type of undifferentiated 'practical moments'. To characterize them, he takes up the idea of 'tacit agreement', of things that are 'taken for granted', as well as a particular notion of 'tolerance' by which 'people turn a blind eye' ['*on ferme les yeux*'] (Boltanski, 2009: 102) to the diversity of usages', constantly engaging in local 'repairs' and 'adjustments' (ibid.: 63, 64). This notion of 'actions in Common' enables him to bring in both Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice and Erving Goffman's interactionism, 'currents inspired by phenomenology' and '*pragmatic* sociology' attentive to 'always situated' action, including 'The Appropriate Action' ['*L'action qui convient*'] (ibid.: 62-64). Although the section on this point is less developed, Boltanski introduces an 'existential test', on the basis of the 'flux of life' (ibid.: 113).

Resulting Contributions to Critical Theory

Among the remarkable set of ideas on critical theory that Boltanski develops in *OC*, I have chosen to concentrate here, in connection with the previous discussion, on a comparison with what the sociology of engagement contributes to critical theory.[2] *OC* dramatizes the break from the sociology of critique that we deployed in *EW*. In doing so, it does not take into account displacements of that theory by means of which I extended it to analysis of the forms taken by domination and oppression. Boltanski maintains that the sociology of critique can contribute to 'metacritique' only because it tends to confuse 'reality' with 'established test formats and qualifications' (Boltanski, 2011: 32). The fact is that the third move of the programme I outlined in 'The Appropriate Action' consists in distinguishing the public qualification and test format, which claims to be appropriate for the common good, from other 'formats' associated with less public engagements (Thévenot, 2007). What I mentioned above in relation to the tension inherent in each regime invalidates the thesis that *pragmatic sociology*, because it is rooted in the 'taken for granted' aspect of pragmatic moments and is 'set on starting out from reality as it presents itself both to the actors and the observer, *tends to produce an effect of closure of reality on itself*' (Boltanski, 2011: 45, italics added).

The plurality of formats for 'marking' engaged reality at levels that are below institutional and symbolic forms enables us to enlarge and deepen critical sociology of domination. According to Bourdieu's sociology, normative forms get imposed on dominated agents by means of unconscious internalization. That approach reveals other dominating forms, defined as 'structural', which – as Boltanski rightly notes – 'occupy the dual position, embarrassing to say the least, of instruments of social knowledge and objects of that knowledge' (ibid.: 21). Indeed, sociologists almost never bring to light structures that are not already recognized and used in social life. Conceiving of 'investment of conventional form' on the basis of its impact on action coordination eliminates this embarrassing position by connecting formatted reality with actions to be coordinated. Such conventional forms include statistical forms used for identifying social structures. This conception is not at all incompatible with critically exposing actors' strategies to turn form investment and the coordination it facilitates to their own advantage when, for example, they are establishing a new standard (Thévenot, 2009). The sociology of engagement has enriched this type of critical sociology on three major points.

First, the notion of 'engagement' enables us to understand people's relationship to sources of trust without explaining it in terms of unconscious internalization. Each regime reveals the

tension inherent in the engagement between trust in an objective marker and concerned self-distancing from it. *Second*, rather than referring exclusively to symbolic form, my analysis sheds light on a wider range of formats and ways of giving form to a material world, apprehending them by analysis that is attentive to bodies, objects and instruments. *Third*, we are no longer confined to exposing domination in publicly instituted forms, and formats – a -limitation to the analysis provided in *OC*, which focuses on 'the main difference […] between *the official* and *the unofficial*' (ibid.: 124, italics in original).

Because a person engages with a form that she invests as marking a guarantee, when others act 'upon' that form, this indirectly affects the person, oppressing – but without directly subordinating – her**.** The first type of oppression has to do with the tyranny exercised by one regime upon another, when the quest for a guarantee of one kind stifles engagement directed at obtaining another kind of guarantee. Contemporary insistence on 'autonomy', 'project', 'contract', 'choice', and 'enlightened consent' – all of which presuppose capacities that pertain to engagement in a plan – put a high degree of pressure on both the upper and the lower levels of engagement. Not only does it eclipse *engagement justified by the common good*, but it also oppresses the lower level of *familiar engagement* in localized and personalized attachments. The damage to such engagement causes more than discomfort or embarrassment; it results in severe humiliation. To be sure, the opposite – that is, tyranny of familiar engagement – equally threatens engagement for the common good.

In the sociology of engagement, the analysis of a second type of oppression contributes to critical theory's endeavour to unveil reification, objectification, and alienation (Thévenot 2006, 2011a, 2011b). The notion of 'engagement', with its two sides, brings to light how each two-sided engagement can get reduced, resulting in what is in fact a cause of structural oppression, which is more diverse than domination by symbolic forms. Such reduction operates as follows. Folding the two-sided engagement over the side of trust in the marker excludes the trying side. Furthermore, the trusted marker gets confused with the factual causality that derives from the substantial properties of persons and their environment. This kind of reduction is at the heart of 'governing by standards' (Thévenot, 1997, 2009). In the more specific case of 'governing by objective objectives', a way of proceeding that is invading all areas of life today, the reduction operates only after the whole range of engagements has been reduced to the *plan regime*. This reductive mechanism condenses all the dynamics of engagement into objective objectives, measurable 'outputs', embarrassing critics with its claim to include the objective measurement of a policy's effects within that policy itself (Thévenot, 2013a).

Domination – understood as the power to have things done by others without directly subjugating them – operates by way of the forms and marks on which people rely; that is, the trusting side of engagement. The combination of these invested forms offers a richer conception of power structures – including micro-power *dispositifs* of the sort Foucault defined – than the macro-social skeleton of structures that sociologists currently oppose to 'agency'.

With respect to 'governing by objective objectives', I have already mentioned the way power operates by reducing everything to the objectives that one invests in when *engaging in a plan*. When someone knows another person's *familiar engagement* in that he or she has become personally familiar with the idiosyncratic clues used by that person, she or he can use those marks not only to take care of that person, but also to oppress her in her most personal life – the kind of oppression with which feminist critique is concerned.

The fourth regime, *explorative engagement*, involves sustaining the excitement of discovering the strangeness of something new. Guaranteeing such a state requires the presence of stimulating cues that trigger one's eagerness. Technologies of communication and web navigation are designed to offer such stimulating marks. Present-day economies play on people's engagements by means of those cues. Doing so, they blur the boundary between consumption and production. Keeping breaks and ruptures going by means of such cues – Boltanski rightly underlines that 'dominating by change' is a major technique of present-day power (Boltanski, 2011: 129) – is a key feature of contemporary capitalism, which Boltanski has worked so effectively to distinguish.

2. Reporting on Testing Engagements: Sociological and Literary Arts

Boltanski has always been careful to separate his sociological art from his art as poet and playwright. I will not wish to leave our on-going conversation without mentioning the second of these arts. Venturing into literary art has prolonged the pleasure of our co-authoring game. Among the themes that link sociology and literature,[3] let me choose one that carries on the previous discussion. I choose Russian literature, because of my personal affinity to a common place, a *locus communis*, that I share with Luc and some of his forefathers. This will lead us to a magnificently depicted character in one of his plays (Boltanski, 2008).

Literary Depictions of Different Engagement Regimes and Confrontations Between Them

When a sociologist enlarges the field of analysis in order to apprehend a wide range of invested forms, from highly collective engagement to individual plans and familiar or explorative engagements, he or she must diversify not only the way he or she conducts his or her inquiry but also the language he or she uses to report on these experiences. Literature contributes to the establishment, diffusion, and learning of various reporting formats and continues the operations of marking the world when engaging with it, while playing on them in such a way as to produce a particular figure of the human adventure. The modelling that an author achieves with literary language makes the reader feel the discomfort that arises from collisions and clashes between the various engagements that make up personalities and communities. In and of itself, language already wrenches apart the shared activity of investing shared forms from private bodily engagements. The formality of conventional language further accentuates the language-based gap between highly institutionalized sources of guarantees and intensely personal sources of assurance. Since Nikolai Gogol, Russian literature has shown itself particularly skilled in rendering this tension, a tension responding thereby to an official 'rank table' of civil servant grades (*chins*) instituted by Peter the Great. The weight assumed in the Soviet regime by the conventional language of modern bureaucracies prefigures the contemporary pretension to be able to certify the world with words, at the risk of confusing this 'wooden' official language with reality.[4] Writers – like social actors – deal in these tensions, adopting various stances – *critical, ironic, lyrical* – to make their readers feel them.

A *critical* stance brings to light how official designations – which aggrandize due to the claim that they belong to engagement in the interest of the *common good* – crush a concern specific to *familiar* engagement to attain the ease and comfort ensured by the personal arrangements required for dwelling in a place one can call one's own home.

> They had to prepare for the cold, stock up on food, firewood. But in the days of the triumph of materialism, matter turned into a concept, food and firewood were replaced by the provision and fuel question (Pasternak, 2011 [1958]: 212).

Boris Pasternak writes that Zhivago feels himself 'a pygmy before the monstrous hulk of the future' (ibid.: 213). The narrator notes that his hero would have gone mad without his little habits, everyday life, without humble, ordinary things – that is, what sustains one's familiar engagement.

The *ironic* stance mocks the preceding tension. Comedy mocks ceremoniousness by way of material detail, as Bergson pointed out. In Mikhail Bulgakov's writing, irony displaces a kind of comedy that verges on vaudeville and produces deadpan comic juxtapositions. In his novel *The Fatal Eggs,* Bulgakov's mockery works thanks to an implicit understanding of common places[5] shared by author and readers. There is no explicit criticism of the sort found in Pasternak. The sense of burlesque is created by sudden changes in language, reflecting collisions between extremely discordant types of engagement. The qualification of the estate as 'aristocratic' metamorphoses into the Soviet qualification of it as a 'state farm [*sovkhoz*]'. Then comes a new transmutation: the inspired worth of a sublime setting is thrown into relation with common places of Russian poetry and music. Sharper still is the collision between the narrator and the sexual intimacy of an engagement whose nature he seems to have trouble grasping:

> The moon shone over the former Sheremetev estate, making it look inexpressibly beautiful. The state farm [*sovkhoz*] palace glowed as if made of sugar […] The spots of moonlight were so bright that one could easily read *Izvestiya* in them, except for the chess section, set in round nonpareil type. […] The maid Dunia somehow ended up in the grove located behind the farm and, by way of coincidence, the red-mustached driver of the battered farm truck appeared there as well. It is unclear what they were doing there. They huddled in the faint shadow of an elm, right on the driver's coat draped on the ground. (Bulgakov, 2010 [1925]: 94).

After the common place of the palace made of sugar, taken from popular Russian fairy tales, and that of the 'white nights' à la Pushkin, comes a duet from Tchaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades* brought into the scene thanks to the sovkhoz director, metamorphosed into a flute-player:

> At ten o'clock, when the village of Kontsovka, located behind the state farm, fell silent, the charming sounds of a flute began to drift over the idyllic setting. How natural these sounds felt over the groves and the columns of the Sheremetevs' former palace. The voice of the fragile Lisa from 'The Queen of Spades' blended with the voice of the passionate Polina and soared into the moonlit sky, like a vision of an old and yet infinitely dear regime, charming to the point of tears. […] The groves stood still, and Dunia listened, fatal like a forest nymph, placing her cheek against the coarse, red-haired, manly cheek of the driver. "Son of a bitch ain't too bad at pipin'," said the driver, hugging Dunia's waist with his manly hand (ibid.: 63).

Adopting the third, *lyrical* stance, Andrey Platonov delivers a work wherein one and the same sentence bears the imprint of a plurality of engagements. The author deploys this tense

confrontation without mockery or critique, noting the tensions it generates and that must be overcome. *The Foundation Pit* (Platonov, 1975) relates Voshchev's teaching the communist ideal to Soviet children. Trapped by their 'childish friendships' and in the comfort of the family home, these children are called upon to 'aggrandize' their aim so as to fulfil the requirements of the engagement for the civic common good. This tension is expressed within single sentences and communicated even more intensely by way of adjective-noun couplings: 'stern freedom', 'serious joy', 'firm tenderness':

> But the happiness of childish friendship, the building of a future life in the play of youth and in the dignity of their stern freedom, imprinted on the childish faces serious joy in place of beauty and *domestic wellfedness*. (Platonov, trans. Mirra Ginsberg, 1975: 9-10; italics added.)

> And Voshchev felt both shame and energy. He was anxious to discover at once the universal, enduring meaning of life, in order to live ahead of the children, faster than their sunburned legs, filled with firm tenderness (ibid.: 10).

Voshchev's effort to integrate himself is vigorously countered by the official call back to order, back to the most public of engagements:

> 'The management says that you were standing and thinking in the middle of production', they told him at the trade union committee. 'What were you thinking about, Comrade Voshchev?'

> 'About the plan of life.'

> 'The factory works according to the plan laid down by the Trust. As for your private life, you could plan it out at the club or in the Red Reading Room.'

> 'I was thinking about the general plan of life. I'm not worried about my own life, that's no secret to me.'

> 'And what could you accomplish?'

> 'I could have thought up something like happiness, and spiritual meaning would improve productivity.'

> 'Happiness will come from materialism, Comrade Voshchev, and not from meaning. We cannot defend you, you are a politically ignorant man, and we don't wish to find ourselves at the tail end of the masses' (ibid.: 5-6).

A sociologist's renewed relationship to literature would see it as much more than a corpus of scenes in which the social sciences can find matter to broaden their databases. We need to learn about the ways in which writing and reporting are modulated by the particular regime and phase of engagement. If we fail to do so, our expounding of the social world may have the same flattening effect as that caused by Soviet 'wooden language' in the excerpt from Pasternak.

The Devil, Probably

Institutions change, and official discourses change with them. Having experienced, in the space of fifty years, two strong instances of government by 'wooden' language – the Soviet Union in the 1960s and contemporary Western Europe – I would not hesitate to compare the Soviet one to the one we are undergoing today. The claim to guarantee reality through governing by standards and objective objectives has now pervaded the world at large (Thévenot, 2013a). The letter of institutional discourse is the one Boltanski identifies with 'reality' in order to oppose it to 'the world'. We find it again in his plays, incarnated by a major character who figures in several of them: the Devil. In *La nuit de Montagnac*, the Devil assumes the figure of 'the Traveler' in order to manipulate the protagonists by 'setting up arrangements […] according to a method borrowed from '"human resource management" techniques', as the author specifies in his Foreword. The Traveler asserts the letter of procedural democracy to the assembly before 'putting to a vote' a game rule that will enable him to manipulate them:

> The TRAVELER: We are going to deliberate together, jointly, for we are equal, human and reasonable.
>
> We are going to coordinate in accordance with a procedure, which shall be the law that seals our agreement (Boltanski, 2008: 61).

The Devil rectifies his interlocutors' remarks, calling them back to the letter:

> Each word counts. If you want to keep the floor.

He inflicts a series of language corrections to bring participants back to the letter of the procedure he is putting in place:

> The TRAVELER: No, not 'salutary'. You will say 'profitable'. …

No, not 'educate', 'programme'.

D. BERSKY: Yes, thanks to you [*grâce à vous*]…

THE TRAVELER: Drop the grace, which has no place here. Say 'produced by' (ibid.: 84-85).

What this theatre scene makes us feel is the oppression characterizing relations between self and other that Boltanski the sociologist handled in his agape regime (Boltanski, 1990). Here it works through the wooden language that names the forms to which the Traveler reduces participants. The Devil instates a game that supposedly 'reveals the unsaid', beneath the 'calling' of the Humanitarians, who 'participate well. Like clockwork'.

Other scenes could be imagined, scenes that would reveal the 'diabolical' reduction-to-the-letter, or to marks and face values of more varied types of engagement: the worried, projective movement of planned engagement reduced to a measurable output; familiar engagement reduced to routine reference points, exploratory engagement reduced to addictive excitation cues. The last of these, circular in nature, deprives people of becoming open to doubt by a kind of relentless stimulation – precisely the sort on which contemporary capitalism counts.

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Luc Boltanski's oeuvre is impressive in many respects – but particularly in terms of its size, scope, creative spirit, and thematic eclecticism. In this chapter, I have tried to pay tribute to Boltanski's major intellectual – and, arguably, artistic – achievements. In this sense, the previous reflections may be regarded as a form of homage paid to his extraordinarily inventive and stimulating work. Obviously, the fact that Luc and I have co-produced a significant number of studies has had a substantial impact upon both his and my intellectual development. One may even refer to a 'Boltanski-Thévenot paradigm', crucially shaped by our shared research projects and publications (esp. Boltanski and Thévenot, 1987 and 1989).

It seems to me, however, that various commentators – somewhat erroneously – give credit to Luc Boltanski for key conceptual and methodological frameworks that we actually developed *together*. This is reflected in the frequent – and, in some cases, distortive – use of terminological catchphrases such as the following: 'Boltanskian

sociology', 'Boltanskian paradigm', 'Boltanskian presuppositions', 'Boltanskian thought', or 'Boltanskian perspective'. These catchphrases are misleading to the extent that they are employed to refer to paradigmatic sets of assumptions that Luc Boltanski and I developed in collaboration with one another.[6]

It is for this reason that, for the purpose of this chapter, I chose to concentrate on some of the core elements of the 'Boltanski-Thévenot matrix', shedding light on the principal points of convergence and divergence between Boltanski's approach and my own approach. Of course, such an undertaking requires us to bear in mind that, since creating a common analytical ground in the works Boltanski and I co-authored, our frameworks have developed further and often in different directions.

In this chapter, I have focused on two central, and closely interrelated, points. On the one hand, the establishment of normative arrangements is contingent upon the dynamics of 'critical reality tests' undertaken in processes of action coordination. On the other hand, sticking to the letter of a given conventional marker puts an end to the doubt that induced the reality test within the codified, ceremonial, and ritual moment of confirming judgmental qualifications. Reduction to conventional markers – a move which Boltanski situates at the heart of his sociological approach to 'institutions' – allows for effective, albeit indirect, domination. Interesting in this regard is the belief in 'the possibility of a society where rules, qualifications and formats applied literally – *to the letter* – would stand solid behind a reality' (Boltanski, 2011 [2009]: 154, italics in original). Reflecting on this possibility in the second part of this chapter, I have drawn attention to the insights gained from cross-fertilizing sociology and literary art.

As I have sought to demonstrate, my shift from the 'critique/justification-codification tension' – based on the 'Boltanski-Thévenot matrix' – to the broader notion of 'engagement' – which contains a comparable inner tension – allows for a broader conception of 'the social' and for an alternative understanding of critical theory, particularly with regard to the concept of 'emancipation'. Instead of limiting the construction of social reality to public formats and structures, the 'engagement framework' takes seriously *the body*, that is, a multiplicity of corporeal and emotional elements of human existence. Such an approach permits us to grasp the complexity of

corporeal and emotional experiences, often related to intimate encounters and inextricably linked to sociological issues around class, ethnicity, gender, age, and 'ability'. This analysis may constitute a response to Boltanski's ambition to 'draw resources from *existential tests*' (ibid.: 156, italics in original), in order to challenge mechanisms of domination and thereby question power-laden situations in which critique 'can only with great difficulty tear itself away from *reality tests*' (ibid.: 156, italics in original).

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Notes

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[1] On the experience of 'playing with representation' in the context of the French critical wave of May 1968, see Thévenot (2005: 258-264).

[2] On the relation between these theoretical developments and the historic May 1968 wave of radical criticism, see my chapter 'The Two Bodies of May '68: In Common, in Person' in *The Disobedient Generation: Social Theorists in the Sixties* (Thévenot, 2005).

[3] From *Le Journal d'Amiel* (Boltanski, 1975) to the detective novel (Boltanski, 2012).

[4] Boltanski notes that 'the institutional use of language' found in 'wooden language' tends to accredit 'a reality entirely subjected to a semantics that gets stabilized from institutionalized positions' (Boltanski, 2011: 92).

[5] On the grammar of *personal affinities to commonplaces*, the term 'commonplace' being devoid of the pejorative sense of a trite saying or topic, see: Thévenot (2013b).

[6] To my mind, this problem becomes clear when reading, for instance, Simon Susen's 'Une sociologie pragmatique de la critique est-elle possible? Quelques réflexions sur *De la critique* de Luc Boltanski' (Susen, 2012). This article offers an in-depth – and, in many respects, insightful – review of Boltanski's *De la critique*. Yet, it seems to me that – similar to other commentaries – Susen's analysis is based on several catchphrases – such as 'Boltanskian sociology', 'Boltanskian paradigm', 'Boltanskian presuppositions', 'Boltanskian thought', or 'Boltanskian perspective' – which effectively give credit to Luc Boltanski for central ideas which we elaborated together and which, hence, form part of what may be described as the 'Boltanski-Thévenot matrix'.